

The new face of Sicily

A wine giant moves: Old vines are being rediscovered, long abandoned vineyards are replanted and new wines are created.

Arianna Occhipinti lives surrounded by wine: In the midst of the living room an old cavern is carved into the stone floor, a few special bottles are kept here. For example the first bottles she has cellared in 2004. She climbs a ladder straight up, one of these historic wines in hand. Out of the speakers in the background comes jazz: A saxophone sets the soundtrack. Through the patio door and across the yard to the olive tree, there are a few steps to the basement, where she vinifies her wines. Arianna Occhipinti is swirling a glass with a cherry-red, brilliant drop, she has just poured: a six year old Frappato, "a variety long been underestimated," she says, "a grape that was blended with Nero d'Avola. But on her own she shows her very own subtle elegance. "

Arianna Occhipinti is in love with Frappato and Nero d'Avola. Her grapes derive from vineyards, who already have forty years and more. These vineyards are also the origin of her exceptional Cerasuolo di Vittoria. The first DOCG wine of the island is only produced near the eponymous town in southeastern Sicily. Long time a bit underestimated compared to other Sicilian red wines, the sometimes almost pale red wine was undervalued as a simple drinking wine. Few wineries - like Arianna's uncle Giusto Occhipinti on his winery COS - believed in his potential. Giusto created a Cerasuolo that he matured in amphorae and caused quite a stir several years ago.

Arianna's Cerasuolo is a wine that arises very clearly the terroir of Vittoria - the calcareous tufa soil, the mild climate influenced by the Mediterranean. No banal wine, but a durable, elegant one, fruity - and diverse.

She leaves the must for a long period of fermentation on the skins, "which gives the wine substance and longevity," she says. Nero d'Avola and Frappato mix in a natural liaison. "I still believe that winemaking is an art," says the young entrepreneur, who only started ten years ago with the winemaking. Today about ten hectares are planted with Nero d'Avola and Frappato, the two basics of the Cerasuolo di Vittoria, another hectare with Albanello and Moscato, two white varieties. All her grapes are certified organic, even if that is not mentioned on the labels. She is convinced that she can avoid chemicals in the vineyard and in the winery. None of her wines is filtered.

An American journalist colleague once called her the "Queen of Country Road 68": On this road lies their small winery. And the Italian name for it - provincial road 68: SP 68 - has also given some of her wines its name: Arianna's Bianco Sicilia SP 68 for example, is a blend of Moscato and Albanello. "Il Frappato" she calls her 100 % Frappato that stays 50 days on the skins. It derives from 55 year old vines. "Ancient cave" is called, however, the top wine of Arianna Occhipinti - a Cerasuolo di Vittoria with impressive key data: It comes from 40 year old vines and ages four years in Slovenian oak barrels before it hits the market. And really, it resembles - uncorked and tasted - a Pinot Noir.

Arianna Occhipinti smiles bright when I tell her that. Then she looks mischievously and pulls a surprise out of the cellar: her Frappato Spumante, which is not yet on the market. He called it Sottosopra (in English: from bottom to top) and is almost a kind of a rarity: a Blanc de Noir à la siciliana.

Just a few miles from Arianna Occhipinti's winery on the SP 68, lies another rock of the Sicilian viticulture: The Good Dorilli of the winery Planeta - one of half a dozen cellars in the whole of Sicily, which are managed by the Planeta family. «Planeta is constantly on the lookout for great terroir," says Francesca Planeta, the daughter of company founder Diego Planeta, "one of them is certainly Vittoria." In the valley of the river Dirilli Planeta planted 17 hectares in 1997, followed in 2002 by another 20. The converted farmhouse is dating from the

19th Century. The production of Planeta is including also a Cerasuolo di Vittoria Classico.

Planeta's Cerasuolo is a wine, that particularly lives of the fine elegance of Frappato:

"Frappato has these fine aromas and this fragility that one expects from a wine from Sicily."

But it grows well only around Vittoria: Only here he gets this cherry flavors and this acidity, which allows him to mature well. Francesca: "On other floors he would be a banal wine, but on this terroir Cerasuolo is anything but trivial." That proves also the new vintage, which she lets us taste from the barrel: Fruity, yet complex, with lots of potential for the future.

Then Francesca tells about another project of her family, which goes in a similar direction as the wines the Planeta-Family creates on Etna or Vittoria: The Vineyards of Capo Milazzo in the northeast of the island. Planeta has planted vines on the peninsula in 2010 to revive the Mamertino, a wine that was already known in Roman times as an example for the quality of the Sicilian viticulture: Caesar drank Mamertino, Plinius praised him. Francesca Planeta:

"Apart from Nero d'Avola and Nocera we planted three indigenous grape varieties that were long forgotten and only occur in this region - Vitruviano, Lucignolo and Catanese Nera." If the trial plantings produce good results, the varieties will be homologated. For now, the project foresees eight hectares of vineyards and 20 hectares of ancient olive trees.

But has not exactly Planeta always propagated the international varieties? Great wines from Chardonnay, Merlot or Syrah? And thus contributed to the reputation that Sicily would be the Australia of Europe? Francesca Planeta nods: "Of course, without the international varieties Sicily would have never acquired the reputation it has today in the wine world. These grapes are part of our history and of course there are areas that are ideal to plant them." But Sicily is now ready to go one step further. "We have this unique terroir, this small regional characteristics, such as Capo Milazzo, like Etna and Noto. And of course there is also the heritage of the grapes that are grown there for centuries." Market opportunities also sees Antonio Stopper, owner of the agency Stoppervini, that sells Italian wines in Germany and Switzerland." Etna is certainly established and the wines are in demand. But a wine like Cerasuolo di Vittoria is a very interesting niche. But these typical regional wines need time to get established. "

Even in Sicily the regional typicity of Pantelleria is unique – the volcanic island is closer to Tunisia than to Sicily. Pantelleria is known as a popular holiday destination with rocky coves, clear waters and interesting dive sites. But it's also famous for its ancient viticulture that came into the country with the Arabs.

A single grape has contributed to the reputation of the island's uniqueness: Moscato di Alessandria, Zibibbo in local dialect. Closely cling the small Zibibbo-plants to the volcanic rocks. They grow in small pits to be sheltered from the wind that sweeps usually rough on the island. The heat of the summer months makes the cultivation of normal wines almost impossible, so the farmers of Pantelleria had soon the idea to allow their grapes to dry to make the wine produced from them sweet and durable. Even today, the grapes are laid out in the sun in order to deprive them of water. Salvatore Murana produces his Passito today in this traditional style as well as Marco de Bartoli. Both produce Single Vineyard-Passito as an expression of a specific location, a specific terroir.

Another philosophy stands behind the Passito Ben Rye of Donnafugata: It is a blend of different vineyards on the small volcanic island. "Some of them are close to the sea and give the wine this fine mineral-salty note," explains José Rallo, who owns with her family the Donnafugata-winery at Marsala, "others grow in the hinterland on volcanic soils. Depending on the location of the vineyards the grapes have their own expression." The Ben Rye of Donnafugata combines terroir with modern viticulture techniques. Already dried grapes are fermented with the must of fresh Zibibbo grapes and create a Passito with a fresh component. José Rallo sees Pantelleria also as a role-model for the new territoriality in the Sicilian viticulture: "Of course, Pantelleria is something special, very unique because of its history and location in the middle of the Mediterranean. But Sicily owns a lot of these little jewels. "

One of the still undiscovered treasures lies on the island of Favignana in the northwest of Sicily. 2011 the winery Firriato has harvested her first grapes here: Nero d'Avola, Perricone, Grillo and Cattaratto. They all come from a five-acre vineyard at Calamoni in the red sand near the sea.

Almost a century the viticulture of Favignana was lost before Salvatore di Gaetano began – together with his wife Vinzia Novara - again to plant grapes. "As with many wines of Sicily the sea is also on this island the main actor," says the dark-haired Vinzia, "the salty and mineral notes making them unique." Two labels will emerge from the 25 000 bushes planted in the tuff soils: A Bianco and a Rosso. The first wines from Favignana for more than 100 years. And another step on the way of Sicily to evolve from Europe's Australia to a kind of huge experimental playground of the Mediterranean.

Box:

The Sicilian viticulture

With nearly 110 000 hectares of Sicily is one of the largest wine producing regions of Italy. The Greek colonists left not just a series of outstanding architectural monuments, but laid 2500 years ago also the basis for the importance of the viticulture of today's Sicily. But still 85 percent of the Sicilian production is white, although especially the red varieties contribute to the reputation of Sicilian wines: The main red grape is Nero d'Avola of which some very characterful, fiery wines are made. In addition there are also the international varieties Cabernet Sauvignon, Syrah and Chardonnay of significance.